

February 14, 2021 Christ as a Leper... The Lepers Among Us Homily: In the rotunda of our nation's capital an event which drew many national and international dignitaries was held sometime in 1969. The highlight of the ceremony was the unveiling of a statue of a nineteenth century Belgian missionary, Father Damien of Molokai. Filled with zeal, this outstanding priest devoted his days and nights to the care of lepers in on one of the Hawaiian Islands. In his diary he described the lepers as "living corpses". Initially, the foul odor of rotting flesh in the leper colony made him violently ill, oftentimes impeding his missionary work. Thankfully, he was able to overcome his revulsion and the effects of nausea and carry out his duties. He fed, clothed and bathed them. He was often left with the task of burying them as well. Eventually, he contracted the disease himself.

In a letter to his religious superior, the Provincial, he wrote the following words:

"There is no more doubt about me. I am a leper. Blessed be the Good God. Do not feel sorry for me. I am perfectly resigned to my lot. I only ask one favor of you. Send someone to this tomb to be my confessor."

Father Damien clearly understood that he lived under a death sentence. Nevertheless, he persevered, and earned the respect of the people. Today, he is considered a national hero in our fiftieth state.

In Jesus' time, people suffering from leprosy, a skin disease, were ostracized. They had to bear the heartbreak of being completely banished from human society and totally shunned. They were not allowed to touch anyone. According to the Law of Moses, "The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out 'unclean, unclean!'. As long as the sore is on him, he shall declare himself unclean, since he is in fact unclean". (Lev. 13: 44-46) Many in the cultural world of Jesus regarded leprosy as a punishment for sin.

Worst of all, a leper was barred from entering the Temple because he was thought unfit for worship.

In today's gospel (Mk. 1:40-45) a leper, a man of humility and faith, approaches Jesus. He took a considerable risk in doing so. Jesus lets the leper come up to him. Unexpectedly Jesus does not run away. He touches the leper. That was a taboo! Touching a leper with skin disease identifies him with that person, making him an outcast as well. In addition, the law governing purity in the Torah was violated. Jesus made himself unclean.

A few points to consider:

First, as his life drew to a close, Jesus was treated as if he were a leper. He was avoided and mistreated by many of his own people, especially the religious establishment. At times, he lived in isolation. On the day of his death his disciples deserted him; and

Second, in this time of the pandemic most of us are familiar with the term quarantine. So many of us are obliged to live in isolation and have minimal contact with others for an indefinite period of time. Surely, we are inconvenienced. But keep in mind that most lepers were in quarantine until the day of their death.

Consider our loved ones in lockdown in many of our nursing homes. They have not seen family members in almost a year.

Do we have the courage to approach those who have been rejected by society and spurned?

A story: Father Vaughan was a man of compassion who exercised mercy in his pastoral ministry. For visiting my predecessor in a Massachusetts prison, he was castigated by some of his own parishioners, who clearly felt that the condemned former cleric was not entitled to the ministrations of a priest or anyone else. Father Vaughan did not share their view. Even the one looked upon as a leper needs Christ.

Jesus was “moved with pity”. He acted immediately. “He stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, ‘I do will it. Be made clean’”.

What about us? Are we ready “to reach out and touch someone” in need?

Amen!